



Monday, April 9, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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Brutal attacks on homeless on upswing across country

By **TODD LEWAN**
The Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — It was a balmy night, the sort that brings the homeless out from the shelters, when the police were summoned to America Street. On the driveway of a condo, just a few paces from the gutter, lay a man.

A dying man.

He looked to be 50-ish and a resident of Orlando's streets, judging by the moldy jacket. And he'd been bludgeoned.

Before being rushed to the hospital, where he died of his head injuries, the man, August Felix, described his attackers. Young fellows did it, he whispered to the officers who got to him first. Kids.

Within three months, two 16-year-olds and three 15-year-olds had been charged with second-degree homicide in the March 26, 2006, attack.

The motive? "I don't think there was a motive," Sgt. Barbara Jones, a police spokeswoman, said, "other than, 'Let's beat someone up.' "

That high-schoolers had turned into executioners brought pause to officials and advocates for the homeless, not just because the killing was unprovoked, but because it fit into a trend larger than Orlando: a nationwide surge in violence largely by teens and young adults against some of America's most vulnerable citizens.

20 deaths

A 2006 report by the National Coalition for the Homeless found 142 attacks last year against homeless people, 20 of which resulted in death — a 65 percent increase from 2005, when 86 were violently assaulted, including 13 homicides.

By comparison, 60 such attacks were reported in 1999, the year the coalition — the only entity to gather such data — began to study the problem.



Ernest Adams, 56, was homeless in August 2005 when he was attacked in Los Angeles by two men with baseball bats. He was in a coma for 21 days.

And these numbers are likely low because they reflect only the most egregious attacks reported by victims themselves, in newspapers or by agencies that serve the homeless, according to Michael Stoops, acting executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based coalition.

The trend is particularly troubling, he says, because such attacks no longer occur just in major cities on the East and West coasts, as was the case in the 1980s.

In its most recent study, the coalition documented attacks against the destitute in 62 communities last year alone, in 26 states. Since 1999, such violence has occurred in 44 states and Puerto Rico, and in 200 communities nationwide.

An overwhelming majority of the attackers — 88 percent — were 25 or younger; 95 percent were male. No less than 68 percent of those accused and convicted in attacks were between the ages of 13 and 19.

This pattern of violence, in Stoops' view, hasn't gotten the attention it deserves from the public or law enforcement.

"Homeless people are the newest minority group in America that is 'OK' to hate and hurt," he said. "It's as though, somehow, they're viewed as less deserving, less human than the rest of us."

Ambush filmed

Americans did pay attention to the story of 58-year-old Jacques Pierre, a homeless man who'd been sleeping on a bench on a college campus when three teenagers woke him up, taunted him, then nearly killed him with baseball bats.

That Jan. 12, 2006, ambush in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., was filmed by a surveillance camera and broadcast worldwide.

"For once," says Sean Cononie, who operates a homeless shelter in that seaside city, "Americans saw with their own eyes how kids hunt down and kill homeless people as though it were a sport."

Such "sport" has occurred elsewhere:

- In Toms River, N.J., five high-school students were charged with beating a 50-year-old homeless man nearly to death with pipes and baseball bats — throwing hockey pucks at him for good measure — as he slept in the woods.
- In Butte, Mont., a 53-year-old homeless man was killed at a Greyhound bus depot because he refused to give another man a cigarette, according to court records. The victim's skull was fractured. The 22-year-old assailant received a 50-year prison sentence.
- In Spokane, a one-legged, 50-year-old homeless man was set on fire in his wheelchair on a downtown street; he died of his burns. Police charged a 22-year-old man with first-degree murder.
- In Nashville, Tenn., a 32-year-old homeless woman sleeping on a boat ramp was shoved into the Cumberland River, according to witnesses. Two men, ages 21 and 22, were charged with homicide in her drowning; authorities say the attack was unprovoked.

Taping their attack

Cononie, who also publishes a monthly newspaper, "The Homeless Voice," reported another trend:

"Kids are even starting to videotape themselves hurting homeless people. That's something we never saw before."

He was referring to an February incident in Corpus Christi, Texas, in which a 22-year-old, a 16-year-old and a 15-year-old describe on camera how they are going to assault a homeless man, then do so.

On the tape, the attackers kick the man in the back, grab him, and flip him around to show off his injuries, according to police. The camera, which had been stolen, was recovered by the owner, who called police once she saw the footage.

Police have arrested one of the teens and are looking for the other two. The victim suffered a concussion but survived.

Some perpetrators are even younger. In late March, a homeless day laborer was walking at night through a neighborhood of Daytona Beach, Fla., when three boys on bicycles attacked him, striking him with a concrete block.

Two of the boys were 10 years old; the third was 17. Each has been charged with aggravated battery. "For a 10-year-old to pick up a cinder block and smash somebody's face with it, that defies logic," said Michael Chitwood, Daytona's police chief.

Though for the past decade assaults on the homeless have dotted the U.S. map, Florida is the state where such attacks are most frequent by far, the coalition's February report says.

Last year, the coalition documented 48 attacks in Florida, where 60,867 of the state's 17.8 million residents are homeless, according to federal figures. By comparison, 11 attacks were counted in California, where 170,270 of that state's 36 million people are homeless.

While some investigators think the attacks are random, Sgt. Richard Ring, who investigated the murder of August Felix in Orlando last year, sees "a more deep-seated problem."

As he puts it, "Our young people get prejudices from their parents in regard to homeless people. They don't identify with the homeless, and they don't seem to see them as important." The juveniles targeted Felix, Ring adds, "because he was easy prey."

Some local governments have adopted ordinances that restrict where and when the homeless can sleep, stroll, beg, eat, bathe or do laundry. This trend may have an unintended effect — reinforcing negative stereotypes of homelessness, which contributes to the violence, some advocates say.

Of late, there have been signs that lawmakers may be ready to crack down on those who assault the homeless without provocation — one being a recent push to categorize such attacks as hate crimes.

Currently, gays, along with racial, ethnic and religious groups, are covered by various hate-crime laws around the country; convictions under these statutes usually carry harsher sentences than other types of crime.

Brian Levin, a criminologist and hate-crimes expert at Cal State San Bernardino, says attacks on homeless people "fit the category like a glove" and should be punished as severely.

Hate crimes, he says, bear similar hallmarks: stereotyped victims, offenders who act on latent prejudices, offenders who seek thrills or feel superior to their victims, and a mob mentality.

"And on all these points," Levin says, "the attacks against the homeless are really indistinguishable from other hate crimes except for one difference — there are a heck of a lot more of them."

Between 1999 and 2005, 82 people were killed in America because of their race, ethnicity, or religious or sexual orientation, according to the FBI, which has been collecting data on hate crimes since 1990.

There were 169 homeless people murdered during that same period, the National Coalition for the Homeless says — a statistic Levin describes as "astounding." It has caught the attention of some lawmakers.

Twenty-six members of Congress have asked the Government Accountability Office to determine whether attacks on the homeless should be classified as federal hate crimes.

Meanwhile, homeless hate-crime bills are moving through the legislatures of six states: Maryland, California, Massachusetts, Nevada, Texas and Florida.

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